USDA
United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

National Water Quality Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries NWQI

Water quality is vital to ecological processes that sustain life. Humans rely on high quality water for drinking, fishing and recreation, irrigating crops, watering livestock and industrial uses. Countless fish and wildlife species also depend on high quality water. But water quality has been degraded in streams and lakes throughout the country because of excess nitrogen, phosphorus, pathogens and sediment from urban areas, industries, farms and ranches, and other sources.

The National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) provides farmers and ranchers with additional tools to protect and improve water quality. Watersheds with the greatest need for assistance are identified in collaboration with state and local partners. When producers work to improve water quality, they also help provide the nation with clean waterways, safe drinking water and healthy habitat for fish and wildlife.

NRCS employees survey the water quality in a pond in Pennsylvania.

NRCS and the National Water Quality Initiative
Launched in 2012, NWQI is a partnership among NRCS, state water quality agencies and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to help producers voluntarily improve water quality in priority watersheds while maintaining agricultural productivity.

NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to implement conservation systems that help avoid, trap and control run-off and erosion from agricultural fields in these targeted watersheds. Practices may include nutrient management, cover crops, conservation cropping systems, and filter strips. State water quality agencies and other partners contribute additional resources for watershed planning, monitoring, implementation, and outreach.

NRCS Goals
NRCS developed edge-of-field pollutant reduction goals for NWQI to show progress in achieving water quality improvements in these small watersheds. NWQI will reduce sediment loss from cropland, across all watersheds, by 772,000 tons, phosphorous loss by 2,052,750 pounds and nitrogen loss by 3,890, 400 pounds. These reductions will help to address water quality impairments/concerns identified in each watershed and contribute towards restoring their beneficial use and ecological function. NWQI anticipates that conservation efforts will contribute to the de-listing of 10 stream segments from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency list of impaired streams by 2018.

Outcomes and Impacts
NRCS works closely with conservation partners to select small, priority watersheds to help landowners implement conservation practices to reduce the loss of sediment, nutrients and pathogens into waterways where water quality is a critical concern.

Outcomes and Impacts (cont.)
This targeted approach provides a way to accelerate voluntary, private lands conservation investments to improve water quality and to focus water quality monitoring and assessment funds where they are most needed.

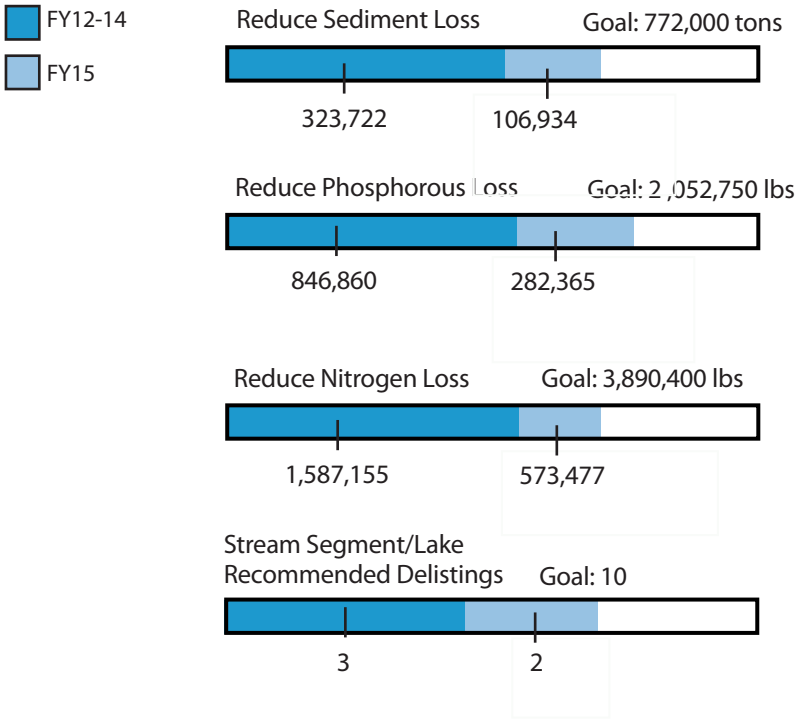
Runoff from agricultural fields may carry sediment, nutrients and other potential pollutants into surface waters. Conservation practices such as nutrient management, cover crops and conservation cropping systems can help reduce runoff, erosion and nutrient loss from fields. Filter strips and buffers adjacent to agricultural fields can capture sediment and nutrients and further protect surface waters. These buffer practices can also help minimize the effects of extreme weather. In watersheds with livestock, practices that implement good grazing practices and properly manage animal waste help to keep nutrients and pathogens from reaching streams and lakes

NRCS and partners help landowners assess the positive impact of their conservation efforts. Edge-of- field monitoring can be used to measure the quality of water as it leaves a field. This helps farmers and USDA understand which conservation practices work best at preventing sediment and nutrient runoff. Verifiable data gives farmers, USDA and other partners information needed to make the best conservation investments to improve water quality for everyone. In-stream monitoring by partners will show improved water quality in these small watersheds over time.

Fiscal Year 2015 National Water Quality Initiative NRCS Financial Assistance (EQIP FA) for Active and Completed Contracts

Region	Contracts	Acres	NRCS Investment
Central	166	29,273	5,240,456
Northeast	55	8,487	1,628,836
Southeast	167	22,468	5,950,946
West	88	62,968	7,880,045
TOTAL	**476**	**123,196**	**22,700,282**

Milestones



Overall Summary

	Number of Contracts	Total Acres Contracted	Investment
FY2012-2014	**1990**	**367,671**	**80,695,130**
FY15	**476**	**123,196**	**22,700,283**
Total	**2466**	**490866**	**103,395,413**

For more information, visit nrcs.usda.gov/initiatives

Helping People Help the Land